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Continued rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres has now entered a new phase. Recognizing current budgetary and political factors, the Department of Public Information has adopted a new strategic approach that combines the realignment of resources, an expansion in the use of information and communication technologies and the building of new partnerships. The present report, prepared in response to General Assembly resolution 60/109 B of 8 December 2005, outlines the steps taken by the Department to further rationalize the network of United Nations information centres, thereby strengthening its information presence at the national level and within regions and subregions.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 60/109 B of 8 December 2005, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to make proposals relating to the further rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres and to report to the Committee on Information at its twenty-eighth session. It furthermore recognized that the network should continue to enhance its impact and activities, including through strategic communications support, especially in developing countries, and called upon the Secretary-General to report to the Committee on the implementation of that approach. The present report addresses the issues raised and actions requested in the above-mentioned resolution with regard to the work of United Nations information centres.

2. The plan for the rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres, first presented for the consideration of the General Assembly in 2002, envisaged the creation of a regional hub in Western Europe with the objective of applying this initiative in other regions, in consultation with Member States, where it would strengthen the flow and exchange of information to target audiences around the world. As a first step, the Department of Public Information closed the existing nine information centres in Western Europe on 31 December 2003 and, on 1 January 2004, established a regional United Nations information centre in Brussels. In his report to the Committee on Information in 2005 on the further rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres (A/AC.198/2005/3), the Secretary-General presented the initial assessment of the implementation of his rationalization plan. In it, the Secretary-General explained the implications of recent reductions in the operating budget of the information centres and concluded that the resources required for the further establishment of fully functional regional information centres were currently not available. In the light of those considerations, the Secretary-General introduced new ideas for the further rationalization of the centres within the resources available to the Department. At the core of those proposals was the adoption of a more strategic approach that emphasized a realignment of resources, the use of new technologies and the expansion of partnerships. The objective of the recalibrated plan was to make optimal use of the available resources in order to achieve a greater overall impact.

3. The present report examines the impact of those changes on the operation of the network of United Nations information centres and introduces additional thoughts on ways to further the rationalization process.

II. Status of further rationalization: adopting a strategic approach

4. The ongoing process of rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres is contingent upon the availability of both staff and financial resources allocated to the Department. The Department's strategic communications objectives, established on the basis of the decisions of intergovernmental bodies and the resulting programmatic priorities of the Organization, have also influenced the process. The renewed emphasis on communications activities at the field level as an integral part of the Department's overall communications planning, aimed at

generating greater public understanding of and support for the work of the Organization, has guided the development of the new operational model.

A. Realignment of resources

5. As reported in the 2005 report of the Secretary-General on the further rationalization of United Nations information centres (A/AC.198/2005/3), the Department, working within the existing budgetary constraints, has sought to strengthen its information presence in major media hubs, while giving the centres in those locations a greater coordinating role at the regional level. Following the closure of the United Nations information centres in Western Europe, the Department was able to reallocate three Director-level posts to centres located in Cairo, Mexico City and Pretoria. Directors have been appointed to two of those centres, with the third appointment expected to be made shortly. In strengthening the leadership of those centres, the Department has also assigned them greater regional responsibilities, requiring them to work strategically with centres in neighbouring countries to develop and implement communications plans to promote United Nations priority issues in a way that would have special resonance in the region. By leveraging the relative strengths of the centres in terms of outreach and information production and also by providing them with additional information technology support, these offices have now been positioned to play an important role in enhancing the impact of the activities of the smaller centres in that region. The Department has also allocated an additional Professional post and an Information Systems Assistant (or Webmaster) post to the three information centres, for which recruitment is under way.

6. The Department has also made tangible progress towards securing either rent-free or subsidized premises for a number of information centres. At present, 44 centres operate from rent-free premises provided by the local authorities or the Governments of their host countries. The United Nations Information Centre in Sydney, Australia, is currently in the process of moving to Canberra, where an extrabudgetary contribution by the host Government will cover the cost of the rental of its premises. Through the savings thus generated, it will now be possible to enhance the centre's public information outreach and activities in the South Pacific. Likewise, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has pledged to make an extrabudgetary contribution, starting in 2006, to cover the cost of the rental of the premises for the United Nations Information Centre in Port of Spain. Again, the resultant savings will be used by the centre's staff for communications outreach and activities in the Caribbean region. The Department has contacted eight other host Governments of United Nations information centres in locations where the cost of the rental and/or maintenance of premises consumes a large part of the centres' allocation of operational funds. It is hoped that as a result, the Department will be able either to secure rent-free premises or to appropriate extrabudgetary contributions to cover that expenditure, applying the resultant savings to enhance the programmatic activities of the centres.

B. Upgrading the use of information and communication technologies

7. The enhanced use of information and communication technologies is essential to strengthening the impact of the United Nations information centres. Owing to

budgetary constraints, the Department has not been able to undertake the regular replacement of computers and other information and communication technologies equipment in its field offices since 2001, except in emergencies. As a result, the equipment in many centres is out of date, even obsolete. Towards the end of the biennium 2004-2005, the Department undertook a limited equipment replacement exercise in 27 centres, which included new computers, photocopiers, printers and video projectors. The exercise was made possible largely through realignment of resources made in the context of the second performance report on the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005. Arrangements are also under way to provide some information centres with recording devices, most of them used or from United Nations Radio stock, to enable them to produce radio programmes more effectively at the local level, and to contribute them to United Nations Radio's internationally distributed programmes.

8. The development of websites in local languages remains a priority for the Department as a means of reaching local constituencies with up-to-date information. At present, 47 United Nations information centres, services and offices maintain websites in 5 official and 26 unofficial languages. The unequal pace of website development has largely been the result of local connectivity problems and the lack of appropriate locally available skills. Staff training in information technology will continue to be a priority, although the funding available for such training continues to fall short of the actual needs. To alleviate this situation, in part, the Department is currently working with the Office of Human Resources Management to extend to field staff online training opportunities that are currently available to staff deployed in headquarters locations.

9. As indicated in paragraph 5 of the present report, efforts to upgrade the information technology skills of staff at United Nations information centres are being supplemented by the redeployment of local-level posts to centres in Cairo, Mexico City and Pretoria to make those posts available for Webmasters and to assist the centres in the surrounding region in website development and maintenance. Those efforts are complementing the project already undertaken by the technical staff in the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe in Brussels to develop a content management system that will enable local staff in the field to update the information on their own sites easily by using a user-friendly template. A new server has recently been provided to upgrade the communication facilities of the Brussels office. The new server will enable the Centre to host the sites of many field offices, particularly those in Africa, thus ensuring reliable connectivity independent of communications constraints currently existing in some field locations.

10. The Department has also made considerable strides in improving the system of internal communications using the latest developments in information technology. Those efforts have strengthened the two-way flow of information between Headquarters and the field and has enabled field offices to communicate more easily with each other. During the first quarter of 2006, most of the 63 field offices were connected to iSeek, the Secretariat's new Intranet-based home page for internal communications, which is managed by the Internal Communications Unit of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, in the Department of Public Information. Field staff now have access to all the online internal information resources that had previously been available only to staff in headquarters locations. That material includes documents archived in the Official Document System, administrative issuances, various alerts

and online training opportunities available through the Office of Human Resources Management. In addition, in 2005, the Department developed StratCom, an internal strategic communications network on the Internet, updated daily, to provide all the United Nations information centres, services and offices with a consolidated database containing a wealth of information relating to the Department's current programmatic, operational and administrative issues. That internal communication resource has facilitated the flow of information and provides an interactive forum for the ongoing discussion and sharing of best practices among colleagues in the field. Regional chat rooms are a popular feature of this site. They enable Department field staff to maintain an ongoing daily dialogue on common issues and concerns, to discuss areas of cooperation and to explore ways and means of developing more effective communications activities, particularly at the regional and subregional levels or in areas where linguistic commonalities exist. This innovation has not only brought the field staff of the Department closer, but is also helping them work more efficiently.

11. Advances in information and communication technologies are also being tapped to modernize the libraries of United Nations information centres. The libraries remain an invaluable local resource, offering key audiences and constituencies reliable access to United Nations information and expert reference assistance. Using electronic resources and training modules developed by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, the reference collections have been modernized. Access to electronically available information is being maximized, ensuring that the Department's small field libraries are able to join the move from "collections to connections", emulating a similar transformation of libraries in headquarters locations. Moreover, using electronically available training materials, the reference staff in field locations are now able to offer training to local constituencies in the use of United Nations reference materials available on the Internet. Efforts are also continuing, wherever feasible, to consolidate all locally available reference collections of the United Nations country team into a single reference library, thus maximizing limited resources and improving access to United Nations information by local users.

C. Building partnerships

12. In 2005, the Department made considerable progress in developing and refining its new strategic operating model at the field level. The participation and contribution of Department field staff have been essential elements in this process. In June 2005, a strategic communications workshop for the information staff from the centres located in sub-Saharan Africa was held at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, with funding from the Better World Fund. Several Resident Coordinators who concurrently serve as Directors or Acting Directors of United Nations information centres in sub-Saharan Africa also participated in the meeting. Three Directors of sub-Saharan United Nations information centres who were deployed at that time as heads of information of peace missions, or who had recently served in that capacity, also participated in the meeting. Their input enabled the workshop to develop ideas on the ways in which United Nations information centres could develop better collaborative communications strategies and activities with two major partners: United Nations country teams and United Nations peace missions. For example, efforts are under way to take advantage of the synergies available

through the presence of peacekeeping missions currently deployed in Africa, to develop joint communications activities aimed, in particular, at troop-contributing countries.

13. The workshop also provided a platform to discuss other elements of the new operating model and establish parameters for future cooperation among the centres located in sub-Saharan Africa. Essential to the new method of work at the regional and subregional levels is ongoing daily contact and dialogue among United Nations information centres to discuss emerging priorities, the best ways of addressing urgent communications issues and possible joint activities. Developing the theme further, the centres discussed specific ways they might share related tasks, such as translation of documents and information materials, preparation of original materials for web posting in local languages, consolidated outreach to regional media and ways to maximize their joint expertise and experience.

14. The new strategic operating model was further discussed and refined at a global strategic communications workshop held at Headquarters in December 2005, with the participation of information staff from 44 United Nations information centres, services and offices. They met, together with the Headquarters-based communications staff of the Department, for briefings and discussions on the strategic priorities and emerging communications issues of the Organization in follow-up to the 2005 World Summit. The Secretary-General, the Deputy Secretary-General and senior officials of the Organization participated in discussions moderated by the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. The workshop was a unique opportunity for field and Headquarters staff to meet with their counterparts, to share and discuss common issues and concerns, and to establish a firm basis for their future work relationships, both within their respective regions and subregions and with Headquarters.

15. Resources permitting, particularly from extrabudgetary sources, the Department intends to organize similar strategic communications training workshops for information staff based in other regions. Likewise, subject to the identification of appropriate funding, similar group training opportunities will be made available for other field staff of the Department, including Reference Assistants and Administrative Assistants, to ensure that all field staff are regularly provided the opportunity to develop their skills, taking full advantage of the latest advancements in information and office technology.

16. A good example of the new strategic approach in the work of the United Nations information centres can be seen in the enhanced role of the United Nations Information Service in Vienna, which has assumed a greater role in coordinating its work with that of the United Nations information centres in Bucharest, Prague and Warsaw, where National Information Officers are the most senior staff. As part of an ongoing consultative process among the information staff of the Department in that subregion, and taking advantage of the geographical proximity of the two locations, the National Information Officer and the Reference Assistant from the United Nations Information Centre in Prague met with colleagues from the United Nations Information Centre in Vienna to familiarize themselves with the working methods of that office and to review areas of future cooperation and coordination. Furthermore, to compensate for its current staffing weaknesses, the United Nations Information Service in Vienna has identified local "stringers" in Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia

to provide communications support for its efforts in those countries in local languages, on an "as needed" basis.

17. The Department has made progress in enhancing the coordination of communications efforts at the country level through closer cooperation and coordination with the United Nations country teams, particularly in developing countries. Building on discussions and decisions made by the United Nations Communications Group during its annual meeting at the level of principals held in May 2005 in Geneva, efforts have continued to establish local United Nations communications groups in all field locations where they may not have been operational. Their presence will enhance joint communications efforts and ensure that all the work of the United Nations is promoted more coherently and visibly at the country level. In most instances, the United Nations information centre has taken a leadership role in the process, establishing the Department's field office as the communications arm of the United Nations country team, by virtue of its knowledge of the local media and other key constituencies and its ability to address local partners in their own language.

III. Communications campaigns: benefiting from a new approach

18. The new, more strategic approach to the Department's field work was tested in the preparation and implementation of communications strategies to promote a number of key activities of the Organization in 2005, in particular the 2005 World Summit and the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Tunis in November 2005. The contribution made by the United Nations information centres, services and offices had a major impact on the success of the Department's public information efforts to promote those events.

19. The Department's offices in the field were essential players in the media campaign undertaken to promote the objectives of the 2005 World Summit and the key issues discussed by world leaders at the Summit. The media outreach capacity and expertise of the United Nations information centres was instrumental in reaching the public at the national level. For example, the centres translated and placed editorials by the Secretary-General and other senior officials in the local media. One such editorial by the Secretary-General, entitled "A glass at least half full", was placed by United Nations information centres in 55 major newspapers in 44 countries and in 22 languages. The centres also organized a number of well-attended national media briefings given by senior United Nations officials who addressed the journalists through videoconferencing facilities from Headquarters or other remote locations. Field staff utilized the strategic guidance regularly provided from Headquarters to keep local media abreast of developments leading up to the Summit. A media analysis of coverage of the Summit has shown that the proactive interaction between United Nations officials or spokespersons and the media helped generate more positive coverage than otherwise would have been the case. United Nations information centre staff also organized and moderated live discussions and radio and television panel discussions, with the participation of key United Nations country team officials, Government representatives and other local partners on a variety of issues to be addressed at the Summit. In addition, key documents and information materials were made available on centre websites in local languages.

20. To promote the World Summit on the Information Society, selected United Nations information centres in Africa undertook an innovative educational outreach programme. Organized by the Department's Global Teaching and Learning Project, it demonstrated how low-cost technology could help bridge the digital divide, with a special focus on Africa. High-school students gathered at the United Nations information centres in Nairobi and Yaoundé participated in a live video web chat with students in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and France. The event took place at the Summit site in Tunis, in front of a live audience that included local Tunisian students. The participants discussed challenges girls face at high school. The Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information moderated the discussion, and Mrs. Nane Annan also took part. Using the same live web-based video technology, the Under-Secretary-General discussed, with teachers gathered at the information centres in Bujumbura, Dakar, Nairobi, Ouagadougou, Pretoria and Yaoundé, how information and communication technologies and cultural diversity could help enhance education in Africa. Local media covered those activities widely, which provided an excellent example of how easily today's technology can bring together remotely located constituencies to exchange experiences and create greater understanding. Both events have sparked interest among the participants in organizing more interactions using live video chats. This low-cost technology has the potential of opening new avenues of communication for field offices in a way that is more affordable and flexible than videoconferencing.

21. Additional information on the activities of United Nations information centres in support of the Department's thematic communications campaigns is provided in the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Department of Public Information (A/AC.198/2006/5).

IV. Rationalization: the next steps

22. In continuing with the further rationalization of the United Nations information centres, the Department will expedite the appointment and placement of staff in several key positions. The newly appointed Director in Cairo is providing strategic communications support and guidance to the centres in the Middle East and North Africa and will lead communications efforts at the regional level. The Directors in Mexico City and Pretoria will assume the leading role in developing their respective regional models of work, building on the specific media environments in their regions to improve the impact of the Department's communications efforts at the field level. As noted earlier, each of the three centres will also be strengthened through the redeployment of a post of Information Officer at the P-4 level to enhance communications efforts within the region. A post of Webmaster will also be deployed to each of these centres to assist in developing the information and communication technologies capacity of the Department's field offices in their respective regions.

23. While uniquely qualified to take a leadership role within the country team on communications matters, some information staff of the United Nations information centres have not been able to assume that function as a result of their low grade level within the Organization. Only 20 of 54 United Nations information centres are headed by internationally recruited staff of the Department. Therefore, National Information Officers, with their intimate knowledge of the local environment,

communications issues and local languages, are the pillars of the Department's communications objectives at the country level. Currently, the Department has only 39 National Officer posts, which means that in nine locations, the information officer of the United Nations information centre performs those functions at a lower grade level. To remedy this situation, which has persisted for a number of years, the Department has been seeking the conversion of nine local-level posts to the National Officer category, an objective that it intends to pursue during the next budgetary exercise.

24. In a separate process, the Department has been working with the Office of Human Resources Management to secure the classification of some National Officer posts at the NO-C level, which will have no additional budgetary implications. This would help to secure a career path for key national staff and retain those top performing local information professionals, who often seek positions with other organizations within country teams that have higher-level national officer grades. At this stage, the Office of Human Resources Management has agreed in principle to make this classification available to the Department on a case-by-case basis, for the promotion of National Information Officers who are the most senior staff of the Department at a given location. The Department expects to proceed during 2006 with the implementation of the promotion exercise for selected staff.

25. The Department considers it essential to reallocate some regular budget resources for a limited amount of travel by key staff, particularly in those centres that have broader regional outreach responsibilities. This would enable them to visit locations across their region and to raise the Organization's visibility among key constituencies, such as the media and civil society. The Department would continue to support the increased use by United Nations information centres of StratCom and of such information and communication technologies as teleconferencing, webcasting and other "virtual" means of communications. Despite the increased reliance on the new means of communication with key audiences, there remains a need for Department staff to travel to take part in communications programmes outside the city or country where the centre is located. This is especially true for centres that are covering more than one country. The Department is committed to finding creative ways of raising travel funds, such as from the organizers of events United Nations information centre staff are invited to address. It will also continue to consult with Member States hosting centres in locations where the expenditure for the rental and/or maintenance of the premises continues to consume a large proportion of the centre's operational funds, with a view to finding solutions that would free resources for outreach activities, including travel.

26. The Department remains open to the proposal of the Government of Angola and the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries with regard to the possibility of opening a United Nations information centre in Luanda to cover Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa. While the Department appreciates the offer by the Government to provide rent-free premises for such a centre, it is not in a position to cover the considerable one-time and ongoing operational costs of an additional office or to identify the local-level posts needed for that purpose from within existing resources. In fact, an analysis of staff and budgetary resources has revealed that, under the current level of resources available to the Department, such an undertaking would be possible only through the closing of one or more currently operating United Nations information centres.

27. At the same time, the Department continues to make every effort to ensure that it regularly provides its constituencies and audiences in Portuguese-speaking developing countries with information products in that language. The Desk for Portugal in the United Nations Regional Information Centre in Brussels prepares and circulates translations into Portuguese of key United Nations documents and the Department's information materials, both electronically and in hard copy, to all United Nations offices in Portuguese-speaking countries. It recently arranged for the dissemination of the Portuguese version of the very popular publication "Sixty ways the United Nations makes a difference", produced in connection with the sixtieth anniversary of the Organization. Audiences in Portuguese-speaking countries are frequent visitors to the Portuguese website of the United Nations Regional Information Centre in Brussels, where new information is posted daily and accessed by lusophone users on a regular basis. Also, the Desk maintains ongoing cooperation with *Africa Hoje*, issued in Lisbon and read by key constituencies in Portuguese-speaking African countries. This magazine publishes United Nations feature articles and original stories about the Organization's work written specifically for the publication. United Nations Radio has also established a working relationship with national broadcasters in the Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, providing them with radio programming in Portuguese on a regular basis.

V. The United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe: lessons learned

28. The Regional United Nations Information Centre for Western Europe (RUNIC), in Brussels, was renamed the United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC) in late 2005 to increase its visibility in the electronic media, since many web search engines detect the United Nations connection only when those words appear at the start of the name. The Centre completed its first operational year in its permanent premises in July 2005. At the end of that period, an initial evaluation of its experience, programmatic activities and operations was undertaken by the Department with a view to identifying lessons learned that could be used to strengthen its performance and, where necessary, improve its services. That evaluation, conducted with the expert assistance of a communications consultant with extensive knowledge about the operation of information centres in Europe and the media environment in the region, identified the strengths and weaknesses of the Centre as a regional hub and suggested ways to strengthen it further. The major recommendations have already been put into effect by the Department and the new management of the Centre.

29. The thrust of the concept to establish a regional hub for Western Europe was to rationalize and streamline information activities and to create a critical mass to perform those activities more efficiently, while at the same time allowing for synergies in the hub and ensuring better coordinated messages. The Centre was also to serve as the principal point of access in the region to United Nations material and data, and to articulate its programmes in the countries served around a common list of United Nations priorities to be conveyed strategically through key intermediaries for maximum impact. However, in 2005 the Centre had not yet fully adjusted to this new regional approach. It was still grappling with the challenges of a dramatic change in the established patterns of doing business and of serving the media and civil society in a large and distant geographical area from a centralized location. The

physical distance from their key local partners was seen by some staff at the Centre as a major obstacle in maintaining the necessary rapport with the media and civil society, in taking part in important media events and in developing new partnerships. Though new methods of functioning, in particular by electronic and telephonic means, had been envisaged, this physical distance from their target audiences had led in some cases to a decline in contacts and activities and had reduced the visibility of the United Nations in the countries concerned. As a result, the Centre has yet to achieve the visibility and standing that had been hoped for in the countries it serves. This problem was exacerbated by the lack of adequate travel funds, which made frequent visits impossible. In order to maintain vital contacts between the desk officers and their target audiences, resources are being reallocated to permit adequate travel funds to be made available to ensure regular visits to the countries covered. Some desk officers have been able to mobilize travel funds from Governments or the organizers of the events they have been invited to support, such as non-governmental organizations and educational institutions. Financial and other support from Governments also enabled the Centre to produce information materials and products in various European languages. The Centre will continue to rely on those vital extrabudgetary contributions to supplement the resources allocated to it from the regular programme budget. Efforts to energize the regional United Nations Associations in European countries to serve as civil society partners of the Centre have also made uneven progress, despite the cooperation of the World Federation of United Nations Associations. Those efforts will increase in the coming year.

30. A regional communications strategy outlining the longer-term communications objectives in the region is being elaborated, taking into consideration the existing capacities, opportunities and limitations of the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe. The strategy will identify the key communications priorities and will develop common messages to be disseminated by the Centre to its target audiences in the countries it serves. This will enable a common regional approach, placing special emphasis on the "European angle" in distributing United Nations messages, which was initially lacking in the Centre's operation. New staff members of the regional centre will undergo basic induction training by the Department to gain insight into the ways the Department operates and to develop a stronger sense of belonging to the Department of Public Information team. The recently appointed Director of the Centre has already undergone such training. Three new desk officers took part in a similar week-long orientation programme at United Nations Headquarters at the end of February 2006. The Department is also expanding its training and orientation programmes to new staff from other information centres. For example, the new Director of the United Nations information centre in Tokyo will be among the first to participate in such a programme during the first half of 2006.

31. The presence in Brussels of the headquarters of the European Commission and of the Council of the European Union were important elements in the decision to establish the regional centre in that city. Relations with the European Union and its institutions rank very high on the agenda of the Centre. A first step in that direction was the creation of a special web page in English and French on relations between the European Union and the United Nations. A staff member familiar with key players in the European Union was assigned to maintain working level contacts with that institution. To further strengthen those ties, closer and regular contacts are being established at the management level with the three European institutions (the

European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament) to identify possible areas of cooperation, including joint missions by journalists to United Nations projects financed by the European Union. All staff of the Centre are being encouraged to maintain contacts with senior officials of their target countries and their respective support staff. In addition, the Centre is developing a new strategic communications approach that will better utilize common synergies between the United Nations, the European Union institutions and other organizations based in Brussels. Those efforts are focusing on the promotion of joint activities and issues of common concern. In January, for example, the Centre organized the first in a series of press briefings on human rights issues, bringing together a United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for Human Rights of the European Union. Visits of high-level United Nations officials offer another opportunity for collaboration. During the January visit of the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, a successful press conference was organized for him and his counterpart in the European Union. The Centre is also developing a much closer working relationship with the large international press corps in Brussels, which should benefit the Organization by increasing its visibility in major European media.

32. The Department has also taken a number of additional steps to foster closer coordination between the Centre and the Department of Public Information at Headquarters and between the Centre and other Department field offices in the European region. The Department is providing the Centre with guidance in management and communications, integrating outreach efforts with the overall programmatic activities of the Department. To further improve the impact of the Department's outreach efforts in Europe, the United Nations information services in Geneva and Vienna and the United Nations Regional Information Centre in Brussels are discussing ways they can better coordinate their communications efforts.

33. Cooperation with United Nations agencies based in Brussels has also been strengthened by the recent establishment of a communications group, which will help develop a more cohesive, proactive and cost-effective approach to communications efforts. The group has agreed that the Centre should be the lead office for most public information activities of the United Nations family in Brussels, and the Centre's meeting room will be the venue for joint press briefings, report launches and similar media activities. The Centre's desk officers also act as communications focal points for specific United Nations priority thematic issues important in Europe, such as human rights and peacekeeping, coordinating activities with United Nations agencies in Brussels and with the Department at Headquarters. The Centre's focal point on human rights has established a "friends of human rights in Europe" group which includes Brussels-based representatives from the European Union, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and others that have an interest in the issue. The group meets regularly to develop a coherent and unified approach to promoting human rights issues in Europe. The new management of the Centre, which includes the Director and Deputy Director, both appointed in the second half of 2005, will institute additional measures to improve its programmatic and operational capacity and effectiveness.

VI. Conclusion

34. The decision by the Department of Public Information to recalibrate its rationalization plan was largely influenced by emerging political and financial realities. The adjustments subsequently made were also driven by new strategic considerations. The advances made in the area of information and communication technologies now offer new opportunities for providing quick, effective and meaningful service to a very large audience. To take advantage of those opportunities, the Department has made a deliberate decision to invest more in information and communication technologies. It has also expanded its operational base by building new partnerships with Governments, civil society and the private sector. In addition, to make the best use of its limited financial resources, it has bolstered its information presence in key locations by reallocating resources and strengthening professional staffing. The overall objective has been to provide a structure and support base that enables better and more efficient service to a larger audience.

35. The United Nations stories are global, but every global story has resonance in a local context. If the Department of Public Information is the public voice of the Organization, the United Nations information centres are the instruments that give that voice a local accent. The centres have always been an integral part of the Department's global communications strategies, but they are now taking a leading role in coordinating the communications efforts of the entire United Nations country team. With greater horizontal cooperation and coordination among the centres and between information centre staff and communications staff of the United Nations country team, United Nations public information will be greatly enhanced, costly duplications reduced and the voice of the United Nations better heard.